



Vol. 77 No. 9

***** EDITORIAL ***** by John Kellas

The September meetings will start off the new RPA programed season. We welcome back all the RPA members from this past summer rest and vacations. Hope to see all of you at the first meeting! Our new V.P., Larry Moriarity, will be in charge of the philatelic programs presented in the forth-coming months. If members have ideas or better yet have programs they are willing to give should consult with Larry at any of the future meetings. - The news article reprinted on the back of this "H & T" makes interesting reading and food for thought!! The author has really hit the U.S.P.S. problem dead center. What do you think? *** ROPEX - 78 GETS THE GREEN LIGHT, more about this in the next "H & T" issue.

***** SEPTEMBER MEETINGS *****

Sept. 8th " Pilatelic Opener " - This is the first meeting of the new season! We hope to see everyone at the meeting to find out what you all have been up to this summer.

Sept. 22nd " FIRST AUCTION OF THE PHILATELIC SEASON " Bring in your stamp material and participate in a RPA Auction! Auction forms will be available at the meeting. Usual rules and please describe the lot. If this is your first time in an auction, there are many RPA members who can help, so don't let that stop you from trying an auction.

***** LIBRARY BOOKS *****

PLEASE RETURN ALL RPA BOOKS THAT YOU SIGNED OUT, AN INVENTORY IS IN PROGRESS!!!!

Modern gadgets are not enough

The writer is a staff member of
The Washington Post.

By DANIEL S. GREENBERG

Having demonstrated dexterity in mishandling the mails at walking speed, the U.S. Postal Service has been advised to partake of the electronics revolution and risk sending our messages at the speed of light.

The suggestion, backed by statistics showing the growing loss of business to privately run advanced means of communication, comes from the Commission on Postal Service, which Congress created to provide advice on moving the mails.

Meet the competition, the commission said, or deficits will grow as commercial firms attract vast volumes of traffic by providing electronic cash transfers, facsimile services and other "instant" movements of data that previously have gone through the mails.

Now, it would be churlish to require the Postal Service to carry on as a foot-slogging enterprise when swifter, cheaper and more reliable means are available for it to do the job. However, before the Postal Service is given the opportunity for inflicting an instantaneous electronic Armageddon on, let's say, several million Social Security checks, it should be making good use of equipment and systems of a relatively simple nature. Foundering organizations often leap for a "technological fix" when, in fact, good sense and competent management could provide a lot of improvement.

MY POINT of reference is not the lofty overview of the Postal Service's computerized systems analysts, who, seeing things in the aggregate, tend to overlook the

- REPRINTED -
ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE
Sunday, August 21, 1977

problems involved in buying a stamp. Rather, it's my neighborhood post office, a drowsy but important local institution, so uncontaminated by modernity that Postmaster General Ben Franklin could take his place behind the counter and perform without difficulty.

A stamp-vending machine sits in the lobby of this station. For customer convenience and productivity of the clerks, it is an obviously useful device. Unfortunately, an "out of order" sign has hung on it for over three years.

The explanation provided by one of the clerks is that it is easily jammed by foreign coins, a vulnerability that, somehow or other, has elsewhere been overcome by the multibillion-dollar vending industry.

So, for the purchase of a stamp, one joins a line. A customer hands an envelope to a clerk. It is placed on a mechanical balance with

which a medieval alchemist would be familiar.

The clerk nudges a weight back and forth, consults a table of postage rates, performs multiplication on a scrap of paper, and rummages in a drawer for stamps. Meanwhile, at big and little supermarkets, items of varying prices are weighed on relatively simple machines that instantly produce a slip stating the price.

THE POSTING of a registered letter involves a question-and-answer exchange between customer and clerk, with the latter required to record the details on a form so small as to defy legibility. At a bank, however, the customer fills out a deposit form, the teller processes it in a moment and the record is adequate to provide for a followup if anything should go amiss.

Against this background of
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enduring obsolescence, it would be agreeable to find that the Postal Service is applying some thought to improving the little things before it takes off into the wonderland of electronics. The findings of the commission, however, are that it is applying very, very little.

According to the commission, the Postal Service has been spending minuscule — and declining — sums on research and development.

Last year, the figure amounted to 0.188 per cent of operating expenses. In contrast, American industry of all sorts, taking the highs with the lows, averaged nearly 2 per cent in spending for this category.

There is so much wrong with the mails that it is difficult to know where to begin in attempting to set things right. Electronic technology will inevitably come, for without it, the ensuing deficits will bring poorer service and the need for still bigger federal subsidies.

But while the experts are attending to the grand-scale aspects of the problem, attention to minutiae would also be welcome — starting, perhaps, with that long-defunct stamp-vending machine.

